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ABSTRACT

Career portfolios contain evidence of individuals' knowledge and skills and are useful tools in job search and career change, especially now that employers want generalizable workplace skills not well portrayed by traditional means and students are often inept at communicating their skills and knowledge to employers. Career portfolios contain and structure information about the workplace, careers, education, personal knowledge, skills, and experiences. The reflection and analysis involved in selecting items for a portfolio provide opportunities to discover and understand the connection between, and relevance of, personal knowledge, skills, and experiences and employers' needs. As a job search tool, portfolios communicate connections and relevance clearly and effectively to employers. To implement a career portfolio program, roles of these actors must be defined: coordinator, vocational and academic teachers, counselors, parents, and local employers. These specific issues of portfolio design must be addressed: how the purpose of the portfolio affects its structure and content, and advantages and disadvantages of the medium (paper and cardboard, diskettes, CD-ROMs, and Web pages). The process of student portfolio development requires careful attention. To derive the educational benefit of building a portfolio, students must do the self-assessment, reflection, and analysis themselves. Teachers and counselors must play the roles of facilitator, guide, mentor, and collaborator and lead the students, through the process not do the work for them. (Contains 20 references.) (YLB)

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PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF NO. 13

Career Portfolios

by Michael E. Wonacott
2001

Career portfolios provide evidence of individuals' knowledge and skills in working with data, people, and things. Developing a portfolio can be a valuable career awareness and career planning activity for youth, including those with special needs, and adults; a productive instructional activity involving critical reflection and analytical thinking; and a very useful tool in job search and career change. This ***Brief*** describes practices in developing and using portfolios for career-related purposes.

Some Initial Questions

What is a *career portfolio?* What is its purpose? Why is it needed?

Definition

You might find terms like *portfolio, career portfolio, employability skills portfolio, career passport,* and *career plan* used to mean similar or different things (Blincoe, Corbett, and Stewart 1996; Schutt et al. 1997; Smith 1996). In particular, a *portfolio* can be broadly defined to include almost anything—resumes, transcripts, letters of reference, statements of philosophy, awards and honors, and examples of work (Felstehausen, Lawver, and Couch 1995)—or narrowly focused, including only examples of work (Ohio School-to-Work Office 1996). This ***Brief*** uses the broader definition for *career portfolio,* which can include almost anything.

Purposes

Portfolios can be used to promote student self-assessment and control of learning, build student self-confidence, support student-led parent conferences, select students for special programs, certify student competence, grant alternative credit, demonstrate to employers certain skills and abilities, and evaluate curriculum and instruction (Arter, Spandel, and Culham 1995). This ***Brief,*** however, focuses on career portfolios used for the specific purposes of career awareness and planning and providing evidence and samples of knowledge and skills to employers.

The Need

Why are career portfolios so valuable for career awareness, career planning, and employability? First, changes in the nature of work and the workplace mean that employers want more than just narrow academic or occupationally specific skills. Employers want generalizable workplace skills like those identified by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS)—managing resources, acquiring and using information, working with a variety of technologies, and using interpersonal and teamwork skills—that are not well portrayed in traditional career assessment measures, transcripts, or diplomas (McDivitt and St. John 1996; Wilhelm 1999). At the same time, students are often not adept at communicating their knowledge and skills to employers; they may not know just what skills they have, how those skills are relevant, and what employers want (Alberta Department of Education [ADE] 1997).

A Solution

Career portfolios can help resolve that dilemma in three ways. First, as part of a career awareness and career planning process, they help collect and structure realistic information about the workplace, careers, jobs, education, training, and personal knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences (Schutt et al. 1997). Second, the reflection and analysis involved in selecting items for a portfolio provides the opportunity to discover and understand the connection between and relevance of personal knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences and employers' needs (Arter et al. 1995). Third, as a job search tool, portfolios can communicate such connections and relevance clearly and effectively to employers (Wilhelm 1999).

The advantages of career portfolios also extend to youth with disabilities and other special needs and adults in career transition, especially dislocated workers, displaced homemakers, welfare recipients, and work force training participants (Koehmstedt et al. 1997; McDivitt and St. John 1996; Perry 1996-97). The career awareness, self-assessment, and reflection activities in the portfolio development process can be of great value to such individuals, who often have a particular need for realistic information about the workplace and about themselves, for structure and assistance in finding a good fit between the two, and for an effective tool to communicate their results to employers.

Developing and Using Portfolios

Educators who have developed and implemented career portfolio programs have a number of lessons to share with others. Special efforts are necessary to implement a career portfolio program: the roles of different actors need to be defined, some specific issues of portfolio design must be addressed, and the process of student portfolio development requires careful attention.

Initiating a career portfolio program requires administrative support, program leadership, and inservice training (ADE 1997; Felstehausen et al. 1995; Schutt et al. 1997). Administrative support should include staff time for design, planning, and outreach activities. A knowledgeable, committed coordinator can be key to successful implementation. Inservice training and informational materials (e.g., program guidelines) are needed to orient administrators, counselors, and academic and vocational teachers; likewise, sample portfolios are highly recommended for orienting teachers to the specifics of successful portfolios. One critical topic in inservice activities is the role of career portfolios within the overall career planning and development program or system (Pond, Burdick, and Yamamoto 1998; Schutt et al. 1997).

Roles

Career portfolio programs involve not only a coordinator and vocational teachers but also academic teachers and counselors (ibid.; Felstehausen et al. 1995). Vocational teachers will play a large role in student portfolio development, of course, and in providing links to local employers. However, academic teachers should play an equally large role in student portfolio development. Many of the skills to be captured in student portfolios are taught in academic as well as vocational classes, so collaboration and integration between academic and vocational teachers are needed both in planning portfolio design and in portfolio development. Likewise, counselors will have a role in portfolio design and development as practitioners in the overall career planning, career development, and developmental guidance system.

There are important roles for those outside the school (Brown 1996; Colette et al. 1996; Conley and Stone 1996; Smith 1993). Parents need to know what the portfolio program is, how it works, and how they can contribute (e.g., providing items to include in portfolios, participating and assisting in the overall career planning and development process). Local employers also play a vital role in the port-

folio program—they are the most likely consumers of the products students develop. It is important to inform employers of the portfolio program, gather input from them on what they would want to see in portfolios, and encourage them to use portfolios in their hiring processes. Other community groups (e.g., chambers of commerce) can be helpful in informing the community about the portfolio program and promoting its use.

Portfolio Design

If you develop a program of your own, you can design it specifically for the purpose you intend; if you adopt or adapt a program, you need to know the purpose behind its design to use it appropriately (Arter et al. 1995; Felstehausen et al. 1995; McDivitt and St. John 1996). Portfolios used to assess student learning or evaluate curriculum and instructional effectiveness tend to be more structured and uniform, with specific quality criteria to promote uniform assessment. If used primarily to promote learning and self-assessment for career planning, portfolios would more likely be less structured, with quality criteria focusing on the process of learning and self-assessment. If the portfolio is primarily a tool for job search and career change, structure would depend specifically on what employers want to see.

The contents of portfolios would also vary according to purpose. A portfolio for authentic assessment of student learning would not need to contain a transcript or Certificate of Initial Mastery—but a portfolio for curriculum evaluation or job search might. Likewise, a career planning focus might include the results of career information searches, aptitude and interest assessments, and postsecondary financial aid research (American Association for Career Education 1996), but those items would probably not be included for authentic assessment or job search. For job search purposes, portfolios must include, for each item demonstrating a skill, an analysis explaining how that item demonstrates that skill.

One additional issue in portfolio design is medium; paper and cardboard, diskettes, CD-ROMs, and Web pages all have advantages and disadvantages (Chappell and Schermerhorn 1999; Drier 1996-97; Powell and Jankovich 1998). Paper is inexpensive but sometimes unimpressive and may not capture some interpersonal or communication skills well. Diskettes and CD-ROMs can capture different kinds of skills very well, but they're relatively expensive and require technology skills. Web pages can capture almost any kind of information—as long as you have needed software, software skills, and server space.

Student Portfolio Development

If students are to derive the learning benefit of building a portfolio, they must do the work of self-assessment, reflection, and analysis themselves—in particular, the analysis of how a portfolio item demonstrates specific knowledge and skills (Colette et al. 1996). Employers may not intuitively understand how a state fair blue ribbon demonstrates personal management and responsibility or how a varsity sport letter demonstrates teamwork and interpersonal skills (Smith 1993, 1995).

By the same token, teachers and counselors must play the roles of facilitator, guide, mentor, and collaborator, leading students through the process of self-assessment, reflection, and analysis, rather than doing that work for students (Colette et al. 1996; Koehmstedt et al. 1997). One final note to teachers: be sure to communicate a clear, detailed vision of what a portfolio is to students, along with some samples of successful portfolios (Arter et al. 1995; Chappell and Schermerhorn 1999).

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